

THE PROBLEM OF THE AGE NO. 1885

**A SERMON
DELIVERED ON LORD'S-DAY MORNING, FEBRUARY 7, 1886,
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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.**

*"And his disciples answered him, From whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?"
Mark 8:4.*

I HAVE been for a while lying outside the crowd, unable either to feed the multitude or to bring the sick to the Master. Here and there one I have helped, as opportunity has occurred, but I have been called to rest rather than to serve. Yet all the while I have never ceased from constant thought about the perishing multitudes, this great city and its sad estate, this country, and Ireland, and continental nations, are all under a cloud of deep depression. One can remove his body from the turmoil, but his heart is in it still. If ever there was a time when there was a call for the deep sympathy of all Christian people with the perishing multitudes, it is just now, if ever the church should gird herself to do her Master's service, it is today.

Never forget that the church is the helpmeet of Christ. She is His chosen Bride, and she is, therefore, to unite with Him in His great enterprise among the sons of men. The work is salvation, and that work is to be wrought by means of divine truth, carried to men externally by human hands, and internally through the Spirit of God. The church will be false to her heavenly Bridegroom if she does not sympathize with the tenderness of His heart, and enter into His gracious labor of love.

The question before us is certainly singular, if we remember that those who asked it had seen a former miracle of feeding the multitude. It would seem that those who had seen five thousand fed would not ask concerning the feeding of four thousand, "From whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?" Inasmuch as on one memorable occasion they had seen the Master multiply loaves and fishes, they might have expected Him to do the same again. I grant you to the full that it was an inexcusable question. I will not offer the slightest apology for it, but yet it is a very *natural* question—natural, I mean, to that fallen and depraved human nature which is our daily grief.

He that knows what human nature is will be astonished at nothing evil that it produces. I do not mean human nature merely unrenewed by grace, but I mean that carnal nature which remains even in the disciples of Christ. This is of such a character that it shamefully gives way to unbelief. You ask me to give an instance, I point to yourself. Have you not often seen the hand of God? and yet the next time you have needed divine help you have been in anxiety and doubt. Remember how Israel saw the Red Sea divided, and yet the people feared that they would die of thirst? When the riven rock had relieved them, they were next afraid of hunger, and after the heavens had rained them bread, they became alarmed at the size of the giants who dwelt in Canaan. All that God had done seemed to go for nothing with them, they relapsed into their old unbelief.

Are you and I much better? Alas, we may here see ourselves as in a mirror. Those who have a smooth path often boast of a vast amount of faith, or what they think to be faith, but those who follow a wilderness way must often confess to their shame that after receiving great mercy they still find unbelief creeping in. This is shameful to the last degree, and should cause us bitter sorrow and great fear lest we should provoke the Lord to anger. Before us must often rise the example of those whose carcasses fell in the wilderness because of their unbelief. All this makes us fear that had we been with our Lord in the desert we should not have behaved better than Peter and James and John, we, too, might have forgotten

the former miracle of the loaves, and have anxiously inquired, "From whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?"

The question, although it is thus surprising and inexcusable, may, however, be used this morning for our profit. It may at least do this good—as we shall not be able to answer it on any human lines, it will show us our inability, and that is what our Lord would make most clear before His power is revealed. I should not wonder but what He drew those people into the desert on purpose that there might be no suspicion that when they were fed they had been supplied from fields or gardens, or by the charity of inhabitants.

It was a barren spot, out of which nothing could be got. The disciples had to feel this, and recognize this, and state this, and then the Lord had a clear platform for working His miracle. He wants to clear you out, brother, He wants to make you see what a weak, poor, petty, miserable thing you are, and when He has brought you to that, then His own arm shall be revealed in the eyes of all the people, and all who behold it shall give to Him the glory due unto His name.

Let us come, then, to our question with the hope that it may be sanctified to holy ends.

"From whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?" First, *this is a pressing problem*, how to meet the wants of the multitude. Secondly, press as it may, *it is one of tremendous difficulty*, but thirdly, and cheerfully, *it is capable of a very glorious answer*. There is a man who, from His infinite resources, can satisfy the countless myriads of our race even in this wilderness.

I. First, then, IT IS A VERY PRESSING PROBLEM.

What is to be done for the perishing multitude? What is to be done to satisfy men's souls? I confine the question to spiritual matters at this time, though I by no means slight the dreadful social and material questions which are also especially urgent at this hour.

At this present moment myriads of *souls are in present need*. We sometimes think too exclusively of salvation as having reference to the world to come, but it has an urgent, all-important reference to this present state. A man who does not know Christ is a wretched man, a man who has never been renewed in heart, who lives in sin and loves it, is a pitiable being, a lost soul over whom angels might weep. If there were no heaven to miss, and no hell to merit, sin is a curse upon this life. It is hell to live without a Savior. If there were no poverty in London, it would be quite enough to break one's heart to think that there is sin in it, reigning over the ungodly.

That grievous side of London life which raises "the bitter cry," is not after all the worst side of it, it is to a great extent the outer disease which marks a secret cancer at the heart. If drunkenness brought no consequences, if vice involved no misery, it would not be better, but far worse, for our race. It is a more horrible thing when wickedness wraps itself in scarlet and fine linen, and when vice, by the help of an abominable protectorate, is enabled to escape scot free.

Sin rampant without check would be even worse than the present woe. It is an awful thing to think that masses of our fellow men have never turned to their Creator with obedient hope, have never confessed their sin against Him, and have lived without thanking Him for His mercy, or trembling at His justice. Great Lord, You know better than we do what horror dwells in the ungodliness of men! Brethren, the multitudes are without the bread of life. Shall we not distribute it among them at once?

The multitudes are also in *awful peril as to the future*. When our Savior looked with compassion on the multitude, He not only noticed their present hunger, but He foresaw what would come of it. "If I send them away fasting to their own houses, they will faint by the way: for many of them came from far." Their immediate hunger touched the Savior, but He did not forget its consequences, they would go back to their mountain dwellings, and in the attempt to climb their terraces one would fall by the hillside from want of food, and another would drop in the sun from sheer exhaustion. Perhaps, a mother carrying her babe at her bosom might find it dead for want of nourishment, or the women themselves might faint and perish by the way. This our tender Lord could not bear to think of. Thus, when we look into the future of a soul, we start back aghast from the vision.

In these times, my brethren, many attempts have been made to represent the condition of impenitent sinners in the world to come as less dreadful than the plain Scripture declares it to be. I cannot see what practical result can arise out of such teaching except it be the hardening of men's hearts, and placing them more at ease than they are now in their indifference with regard to their fellow men. I know that at this hour a master argument with my heart in seeking to save my fellow men is the intolerable thought that, if they die without a Savior, they enter upon a fixed state, in which they will continue in sin, and in consequent misery without hope of change. I am anxious to save men from hell at once, because I see no other day of hope for them.

Since these things are so—and I am assured they are—every man who has a spark of humanity and a grain of grace is bound to cry mightily unto God concerning the vast multitude of men who are passing away from under the sound of the Gospel, rejecting it, who are living in the land of Gospel light and willfully closing their eyes to it, and so are choosing endless darkness. If you are not roused to action, O Christian man, by the twofold belief that sin in this life is an intolerable evil, and that, in the world to come, it involves endless woe, what will bestir you? If this does not awaken your compassion for men, if this does not bring you heartbreak, are you not hard as stones, unfeeling as savage beasts?

The case of the multitude is laid upon the church of God. The Lord Jesus Christ took up all the hungry thousands, and laid them at the feet of His disciples. These were His own words, as He commissioned them, "Give ye them to eat." It was a great honor to them to be taken into co-partnership with their Lord—a high privilege to be workers together with Him in relieving this far-spread hunger. It was a great honor, but what a responsibility it involved! If one of them had quietly stolen into the background, whispering to himself, "This is a Quixotic notion," if another had hidden behind a rock and said, "I shall pray about it, but that is all I can do"—why what a disgrace it would have been to them!

Instead of which, they were found true-hearted to their Master, and the burden being laid upon them, they took up that burden in a fashion, and their Lord enabled them to carry it with joy. They had the special happiness of handing out the bread to the vast host, who gratefully received the boon. The twelve were very popular men that day, I warrant you, and they were looked upon with great envy by all who surrounded them.

Was it not a high privilege to distribute food amongst so many hungry men, and women, and children? They must have been flushed with excitement, and filled with delight. I know I should have been. To go among a crowd of eager, hungry people, and to feed them to the full, is a work an angel might covet. I am sure that many generous hearts here are already devising ways of feeling this delight. Are you not? I mean literally. Will you not help to relieve the present distress by gifts of food and clothing?

Returning to the spiritual aspect of the matter, the Lord has called His church in these days to this work, onerous and indeed impossible without Himself, but with Him, honorable, simple, and easily accomplished. He calls His church to the great task of feeding the multitudes of London, the multitudes of our empire, the multitudes throughout the whole world, and since He is present to multiply our loaves and fishes the pressing problem may not be abandoned in despair.

Brethren, *we cannot put aside this work*, we that are Christians indeed cannot escape from this service. The Master has laid it upon us, and the only way to get out of it is by renouncing His leadership altogether. To attempt to be a Christian and not to live for your fellow men is hypocrisy, to suppose that you can be faithful to Christ and let these multitudes die without an effort is a damnable delusion. He is a traitor to his Master who does not enter heart and soul into the great life-work of that Master, and His life-work was "that the world through Him might be saved" (Joh 3:17).

If you will say good-bye to Jesus, you may run away with your own loaf and your own little fish, and eat them in secret selfishness, but if you mean to be with Christ, you must bring here your loaf and your fish and contribute it, you must bring yourself, and be the personal dispenser of the multiplied bread and fish, and you must persevere in the distribution till the last man, the last woman, the last child,

shall be filled. Then Jesus shall have all the glory of the feast, but to you will be the honor of having been a servitor at His royal table in the august banquet of His love.

So you see where we are this very morning. We are called to work out a very pressing problem, "Whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?" Let us not sleep, as do others, but let us rouse ourselves to work side by side with those dear and faithful brethren who are toiling manfully to hand out the bread of life to the millions of this city, the teeming myriads of this world.

II. But now secondly, IT IS A PROBLEM OF TREMENDOUS DIFFICULTY.

The difficulty of feeding the four thousand was enormous, but the difficulty of saving the multitudes of the human race is as high above it as the heaven is high above the earth. After all, this miracle only gave a single meal to a few thousand, who soon grew hungry again, the work needed is to feed myriads so that they shall not hunger again forever. Think of this!

For first, what a thing it is to satisfy *the needs of a single soul!* I should like those who think the salvation of souls from sin to be easy to try to convert one person. Sunday school teacher, did you ever attempt to bring one girl to Christ yourself? She shall be one of the sweetest children in the whole school, but if you have attempted her conversion without seeking divine aid in prayer, and without looking to the Spirit of God to influence that little heart for good, you have made a miserable failure of it.

If you had to save a soul, where would you begin? The introduction of a holy thought into carnal minds is a miracle as great as to get a beam of light into a blind eye, or a breath of life into a dead body. How hard it is to deliver a man from brutish carelessness, and make him think of his soul, and eternity, and God! As to renewing the stony heart, as to quickening the dead soul into life, who can do it? Here we enter into the region of miracles! Can you create a fly? When you have created the minute creature, then talk about making a new heart and a right spirit.

To "satisfy," says the text—"whence shall a man satisfy these men?" To satisfy a soul is a work which only God can accomplish. Open your mouth, O man of ambition! We put the round world upon his tongue, and when he has swallowed it, he cries, like Alexander, for another. He is no more satisfied with the whole world than with a pill of bread. As to the spiritual cravings of men, how can you satisfy them? Pardon for sin, a hope of eternal life, likeness to Christ, these are necessary to satisfy, how can we give them? The world has no such food in all its stores.

The work is impossible at the outset, when only one claimant appears. Whence can a man satisfy the spiritual hunger of a single soul? I should like every Christian man to be laid low with this thought, that he may be driven entirely out of conceit of himself, and may at once cry to the strong for strength, and use the simple weapon of the Gospel in the power of the Holy Ghost, and not in his own strength.

But, brothers and sisters, what am I talking about? One soul! What of that? *Think of the numbers who need heavenly bread.* We have not only one soul, not only one million souls, but hard upon five millions of immortal beings in this single city. In this huge world what myriads have we? A thousand millions would not compass the countless army now encamping on the globe. Would we deliberately exempt one of these from hope? Would we desire one of these to be willfully left to perish? Must not all be fed, if possible? Shall not every man and woman and child, as far as our desire can go, partake of the feast?

Well, then, where are we? We are altogether at sea. Why, we have not a notion of what a million is. It will take a very, very long time even to count to that number. Think of this City of London—why, you shall ride through it, or you shall traverse it on weary foot for a year, and at the end you shall only wonder more at its incalculable vastness. To supply this great metropolis with gracious influences is a labor worthy of a God. The church of God is called to feed all these with the bread of heaven, and all those out yonder in the heathen world. O feebleness! what can you do alone? Yet, O feebleness, how gloriously God can use you for the accomplishment of His divine purposes! There is the problem. Said I not truly that it is one of tremendous difficulty?

What seems to have struck the disciples was the place they were in—it was *a desert place*. Perhaps you might see here and there a little bitter herbage, which a goat would disdain to browse, but for the most part it was bare ground. Our evangelist, in describing the first miracle, is quite graphic in describing the green grass, but in this case he says that they sat on “the ground”—the ground bare of verdure. There were no corn fields, nor fruit-bearing plants, there was literally nothing to turn to account. If the stones could have been turned into bread, the people might have been filled, but the ground itself yielded absolutely nothing.

I may be supposed, perhaps, to croak when I say that the present period is as bare of all help to the Gospel as that ground was barren of help to the feast. The world has never known a period less helpful to the Gospel than the present. We read in the Revelation of a time when “the earth helped the woman,” but it is not so now. I see no element favorable to the conversion of the world to Christ, but everything is in array against it. The people are not so attentive to the Gospel as once they were, the masses do not care even to enter the house of prayer, in London they have, to a very large extent, ceased to care about the preaching of the Word.

They are to be reached, blessed be God, they shall be reached, but the tendency of the times is not towards religion, but towards unbelief, materialism, and sordid selfishness. A current, nay, a torrent, of unbelief is roaring around the foundations of society, and our pulpits are reeling beneath its force. Many Christian people are only half believers now, they are almost smothered in the dense fog of doubt which is now around us. We have come into cloud-land, and cannot see our way. Many are sinking in the slough, and those of us who have our feet upon the Rock of Ages have our hands full with helping our slipping friends.

Standing before God with a child-like faith, and trusting in Him without question, it does not matter to us personally if the surrounding darkness should deepen into seven midnights black as hell, for we walk by faith and not by sight. Though the earth were removed, and the mountains cast into the midst of the sea, we should still hold to God and to His Christ in a death grip of unshaken confidence. But the mass of professors are not so. I constantly meet with brethren who are reeling to and fro, and staggering like a drunken man, and who are at their wits’ end, and rejoicing that I have been given my sea-legs, I have to cheer them and assure them that we are not shipwrecked after all.

The good ship is not going down, the everlasting truth is as sure as ever, the day is not far distant when the Lord shall send us a great calm. It will before long come to pass, that the infidel philosophies of the nineteenth century will be exhibited to little children in our Sunday schools, as an instance of the monstrous folly into which wise men were allowed to plunge when they refused the Word of the Lord. I am as sure of it as I am sure I live, that the present wisdom is foolery writ large, and that the doctrine which is now rejected as the effete theory of Puritans and Calvinists will yet conquer human thought and reign supreme.

As surely as the sun which sets tonight shall rise tomorrow at the predestined hour, so shall the truth of God shine forth over the whole earth. But this era is a desert place, in pulpits and out of pulpits, in social morals and in politics, it is a dreary wilderness. “From whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in this wilderness?”

The Lord has often suffered the multitude to be in straits that He might work gracious deliverances. Take a modern instance. One hundred and fifty years ago or so, there was a general religious lethargy in England, and ungodliness was master of the situation. The devil, as he flew over England, thought that he had drugged the church so that it would never wake again. How deceived he was! A student at Oxford, who had been a potboy down in Gloucester, found the Savior, and began to preach Him. His first sermon was said to have driven nineteen people mad, because it awakened them to true life. Certain other scholars in Oxford met together and prayed, and were dismissed the university for the horrible iniquity of holding a prayer meeting. Out of the same university came another mighty evangelist—John Wesley—and he, with Whitefield, became the leader of the great Methodist revival, its effects are with us to this day.

The arch-enemy soon found that his hopes were blighted, for the church awoke again. The poor miners were listening to the Gospel, their tears were making gutters down their black cheeks, while seraphic men told them of pardoning love. Then respectable dissent awoke from its bed of sloth, and the Church of England began to rub her eyes, and wonder where she was. An evil time brightened into a happy era. Shall it not be so again? Have no fear about it. All things shall work together for good. The Lord brings the people into the wilderness on purpose, that there it may be seen that it is not the earth, but Himself, that feeds the people.

The sting of the question before us, however, I have not quite brought out, *it was human feebleness*. His disciples answered Him, "From whence can *a man* satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?" From whence can *a man* do it? We are only men. If we were angels! Oh, if we were angels! Well, what of it? If we were angels I am sure we would be quite out of the business, for "Unto the angels hath he not put in subjection the world to come, whereof we speak?" The angels are not in the field. But whence can a man or a woman do it? Whence shall a man feed this multitude?

"Why, see," says one, "what I am! I am no great orator, I have not ten talents, I am a weak creature. From whence can I feed this multitude? What can I do?" This is the sting of it all to earnest hearts. "Ah," says one, "if I were So-and-So, what I would do!" You may thank God you are not anybody but yourself, for you are best as you are, though you are not much to speak of now. "But if I were somebody else, I could do something," which means this—that since God has chosen to make you what He has made you, you will not serve Him, but if He will make you somebody else—that is, if your will may be supreme, then, of course, the house will be ordered rightly. You had better be what you are, and a little better, and get to work and serve your Master, and no longer talk about "Whence shall a man do this or that?"

The possibilities of a man are stupendous. God with a man, nothing is impossible to that man. Give us not the power of gold, or rank, or eloquence, or wisdom, but give us a man. Our Lord thought so when He went up to heaven. He meant, as He entered the pearly gates, to scatter a divine largess among His people down below, and He reached His hand into His Father's treasury, and He took out of it—what? He took men. "And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers." These were His ascension gifts to the sons of men.

Though we speak thus of what God can make of us, we are in and of ourselves poor creatures. We do meet with a perfect brother now and then, and I always feel inclined to break that bubble. The imperfections of the perfect are generally more glaring than those of ordinary believers. Alas! we are all such poor, frail creatures, that we are driven away from all confidence in ourselves, and we ask with emphasis the question, "From whence can *a man* satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?"

III. I am happy, therefore, to come to a blessed conclusion in the third head of our discourse, by saying that, laying the emphasis on its weakest word, "Whence, can a *man*?"—THIS QUESTION IS CAPABLE OF A VERY GLORIOUS ANSWER.

I might almost say, as John the Baptist did, "There standeth one among you, whom you know not." Though He has stood among us all these centuries, yet His people scarcely know Him. Who knows Him fully? "Oh," says one, "I know Christ." Yes, in a sense, but yet He passes knowledge. "I believe in God," says one; are you sure you do? I remember reading of a certain minister who spent many days in wrestling prayer because he was tempted to doubt whether there was a God, and when he came into the full conviction of it he said to his people, "You will be surprised at what I say, but it is a far greater thing to believe in God than any of you know."

And so it is a greater thing to believe in Jesus than most people dream. To believe in the notion of a god is one thing, but to believe God is quite another matter. One said to me when I was troubled, "Have you not a gracious God?" I answered, "Certainly I have." He replied, "What is the good of having Him, then, if you do not trust Him?" I was sore smitten by that reply, and felt humbled in spirit. We do not fully know what Jesus is. He is far above our highest thought of Him. He stands among us and we know Him not.

But what I want you to think of is that this wonderful Man can feed this people with bread this day, and in this wilderness. I hope to make you believe it by the power of the Spirit of God. Therefore I ask you, first, to *listen to what this Man says*. I read to you just now this narrative as we find it in the fifteenth of Matthew. Turn again to the thirty-second verse, "Jesus called his disciples unto him, and said"—Stop a moment. Prepare your ears for music. He said, "I have compassion on the multitude." Oh, the sweetness of that word! When you are troubled about the people, troubled about Ireland, troubled about London, troubled about Africa, troubled about China, troubled about India, hear the echo of this word—"I have compassion on the multitude."

If Jesus spoke thus to His people while here, He equally says it now that He is exalted on high, for He has carried His tender human heart up to heaven with Him, and out of the excellent glory we may hear Him still saying, in answer to His people's prayers, "I have compassion on the multitude." There is our hope, that heart through which the spear was thrust, and out of which there came blood and water, is the fountain of hope to our race. "I have compassion on the multitude."

Hear Him speak again, and I think you will grant that there is much sweetness in the utterance. At the end of the thirty-second verse we read, "I will not send them away fasting." We do not wish to judge Peter, and James, and John, but it seems to me that after hearing the Master say, "I will not send them away fasting," they hardly ought to have said, "Whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?" They ought quietly to have replied, "Good Lord, You have asked us a question which You must Yourself answer, for You have distinctly made the promise, 'I will not send them away fasting!'"

Do you think the Lord Jesus Christ means after all to leave this world as it is? It is written that, "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved." Will He forego His purpose? The chronicle of time's history will not wind up with this horrible state of things. The loom of providence will not leave its piece of cloth with its edge so fearfully unraveled, it shall be finished off in due order, and yet be bordered with thread of gold. The glory of God shall yet illuminate history from the beginning even to the end. All flesh shall see the salvation of God, and all nations shall yet call the Redeemer blessed.

"I will not send them away fasting." The people must therefore eat bread from the Lord's hands. Great Master, the task is far too much for us alone, but if You have said, "I have compassion on the multitude, I will not send them away fasting," then we will feed them at Your command. Your humble servants are waiting to do Your bidding, whatever it may be, assured that You will be with them in it all.

I beg you also to think for a moment of what the Lord did not say, because He was speaking about common bread, but *of what we know to be true of Him* concerning His spiritual supplies for men. The greatest spiritual want of man is the pardon of sin by atonement.

Brothers, if the question were now standing, "Where shall we find atonement?" it would indeed stagger us. Blessed be God, that question does not remain, for the atonement has been presented, completed, and fully accepted. Jesus has said, "It is finished," and the real difficulty is over. The cross has rolled away the stone from the sepulcher, and hope has arisen. The application of the atonement may be difficult, but it must be a small labor compared with the making of the atonement. The well has been digged, the drawing of the water is an easier task. If Jesus died there must be life for men, if He has prayed "Father, forgive them" there must be pardon for the guilty. If Jesus has risen into glory our race cannot perish in shame. We argue from the cross a millennium of glory. This Man can satisfy the people because of the rich merit of His blood.

Next, remember that this glorious Man is now invested with omnipotence. His own words are, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them." Our Jesus is omnipotent. It is He who, by the infinite wisdom of God, made the world, and without Him was not anything made that was made. Is anything hard for the Creator? Is anything impossible, or even difficult to Him who rules all things by the power of His Word? Courage, brothers, the grand question is

answered. Since there is a full atonement and there is an exalted Savior, with all power in His hands, what remains to dismay us?

Listen once more. The Spirit of God has been given. Better than Christ's bodily presence among us is the presence of the Holy Spirit. It was expedient that Jesus should go away that the Holy Ghost might abide with us, as a greater blessing for the church. Is the Holy Ghost gone? Has the Holy Spirit left the church of God? Is the church appalled by her difficulties though the Spirit of God is poured out upon her? What is she doing? Has she forgotten herself? Has she become insane?

Brother, with Jesus Himself slain as an atonement—Jesus exalted as a Prince and a Savior at the right hand of God, and with the Divine Spirit abiding with us forever, what is there impossible to the church of God?

So I close by one more point, which is this, As I have made you hear our Lord's words, and also led you to remember the infinite resources at His disposal, I now want you to *anticipate His working*. How does the Christ work among men? How will He proceed when He gets fairly to work among the masses? There are varieties of operations, but there is a continuity of law running through them all, and the divine line of action is much the same in all cases.

The way of the Christ was, first of all, to find out what there was which He could use. The little store provided by His followers consisted of a few loaves and fishes. Is it not wonderful how the Lord sometimes finds out little matters which have been hidden away, and makes much of them? Scotland was once under the sway of unbelief and formalism, how was it to be delivered? Thomas Boston went into a shepherd's hut, and found a book which had become extremely scarce, it was Fisher's "Marrow of Modern Divinity." Boston rejoiced in the light of the Gospel which flashed in upon his soul, and he began to bear witness to it. A great controversy followed, and what was far better, a great awakening, the lovers of the marrow of the Gospel soon broke the bones of error. See what one book may do? Sweden, too, was greatly blessed by the discovery in a country house of an old copy of Luther on Galatians. See how one voice may wake a nation.

Brethren, who knows, what may come out of seven loaves and a few small fishes? Yea, the enemies may do what they like, they may preach what they please, they may take away one pulpit after another from the orthodox, they may bury us under the rubbish of evolution, and false philosophy, but we shall rise again. These small clouds will soon blow over. There may not remain one single sound expounder of the Gospel, but as long as God lives, the Gospel will not die. Its power may slumber, but ere long it shall awake out of sleep, and cry like a mighty man who shouts by reason of wine. As long as we have one match left we can yet set the world on fire. As long as one Bible remains the empire of Satan is in danger. Only barley loaves and a few small fishes were in the possession of the apostolic company, but Jesus found them, and began to work with them.

The next thing was a secret and mysterious multiplication. The bread began to grow in the disciples' hands as aforetime it had grown in the ground. Peter had a loaf in his hand, and he began to break off a corner, to his amazement it was just as big as before. So he broke off the other end and gave that to another hungry person, and lo, the loaf was still entire. He kept on breaking as fast as ever he could, and the loaf continued increasing till everybody had received his full. Wonderful hands they were, were they not! No, they were not, they were only the rough hands of weather-beaten fishermen. Those other hands which first took, and blessed, and broke, were doing the deed all the while. It is wonderful how God works by our hands, and yet His own hand does it all.

Apart from human agency, the Lord can impress the minds of men and women, and so multiply His truth. I heard of a woman in the Isle of Skye, when there was very little Gospel preaching there, who on a sudden felt God was not working in Skye. She journeyed till she reached the ferry, and then she crossed to the mainland. She asked those she met where she could find God. At last she met with a good woman who said, "I will tell you where you will find Him." She took her into a place of worship where Jesus was plainly set forth. She heard the Gospel, and went back to tell others about the Savior.

The devil's work is never done, it is undone again in five minutes when the grace of God is at work. Even in our ashes live our wonted fires, a breath from heaven shall kindle them into a flame. God is never at a loss for agents. He could turn the Pope into an evangelist, a cardinal into a reformer, a priest into a preacher of the Gospel. The most superstitious, the most ignorant, the most infidel, the most blasphemous, the most degraded, may yet be made the champions of His truth. Therefore let no man's heart fail him, the bread shall be multiplied, and the people shall be fed.

It was done by everybody distributing his portion. Peter was dividing his loaf, and many people were especially pleased to be fed by Peter. It was quite right that they should be. If Peter fed them, let them be satisfied with Peter. Yonder was John with the same bread, breaking it with less impetuosity and more graciousness of manner, and yonder was James working away very steadily and methodically. But what of the difference of distribution? The bread was the same. So long as the people were filled, what did it signify which hand passed them their bread and fish?

Dear friends, do not imagine that God will bless one preacher only, or one denomination only. He does bless some preachers more than others, for He is Sovereign, but He will bless you all in your work, for He is God. I shall never forget one day, when my dear old grandfather was alive, I was to preach a sermon. There was a great crowd of people, and I did not arrive, for the train was delayed, and therefore the venerable man commenced to preach in my stead. He was far on in his sermon when I made my appearance at the door. Looking at me, he said, "You have all come to hear my dear grandson, and therefore I will stop that you may hear him. He may preach the Gospel better than I can, but he cannot preach a better Gospel. Can you, Charles?" My answer from the aisle was, "I cannot preach the Gospel better, but if I could, it would not be a better Gospel."

So it is, brethren, others may break the bread to more people, but they cannot break better bread than the Gospel which you teach, for that is bread from our Savior's own hand. Get to work each one of you with your bread-breaking, for this is Christ's way of feeding the multitude. Let each one who has himself eaten divide his morsel with another. Today fill someone's ear with the good news of Jesus and His love. Endeavor this day, each one of you who are Christian people, to communicate to one man, woman, or child, something of the spiritual meat which has made your soul glad.

This is my Master's way, will you not drop into it? You cannot propose a better, none can contrive a method more likely to be successful, more honorable to your Lord and more beneficial to yourself. Bring your barley loaf, bring your little fish, and put your provision into the common store. Take it back again from the great Master's hands filled with that blessing which makes it fruitful, and multiplies it, and then feed the multitude with it. So shall you go forth with joy, and be led forth with peace. So be it. Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—MATTHEW 15

HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK”—196, 33, 357

Taken from The C. H. Spurgeon Collection, Version 1.0, Ages Software. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.